

EI-1293

JESSICA (CESIRA ANTOINETE DI MARTINO) DE VITO

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LEVINE: Today is September 26th, the year 2003. I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Jessica De Vito, who came through Ellis Island when she was seven years old in 1927. And she left from the port of Naples. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And if we could start, please, if you would say your name as it would have appeared on the ship's manifest when you came to this country.

DE VITO: Should I—do you want me to show my passport? I brought it.

LEVINE: Okay. Oh, wow.

DE VITO: My grandchildren have—have been taking it to school to—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE VITO: —I don't know—some kind of programs—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: So—this is—

LEVINE: So this is your passport—

DE VITO: And my mother.

LEVINE: —and it shows a picture of your mother—

DE VITO: My mother.

LEVINE: —and a picture of you.

DE VITO: Me, yes.

LEVINE: And so you were traveling with your mother?

DE VITO: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. Oh, that's beautiful. Wow.

DE VITO: And—

LEVINE: Okay. Well, so what was your name then on the—

DE VITO: It was Cesira Di Martino.

LEVINE: And would you spell Cesira for the tape?

DE VITO: Yes, it's C-E-S-I-R-A.

LEVINE: And you said earlier your middle name was Antoinette.

DE VITO: Antoinette, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. And your birth date?

DE VITO: June 7th, 1920.

LEVINE: And [clears throat] where in Italy were you born and did you live until you came here? And would you spell those, please?

DE VITO: Yes. I was born in Guardiagrele—G-U-A-R-D-I-A-G-R-E-L-E, province of Chianti [PH] Abruzzi. I lived there until I emigrated to America—

LEVINE: Okay.

DE VITO: —in 1927. October, 1927.

LEVINE: Okay. And what was your father's name?

DE VITO: Antonio.

LEVINE: And your mother?

DE VITO: [unclear]. My mother's name was—you know, in Italy, they don't use the husband's names. So she's—here, she—Maria Rosa Rullo.

LEVINE: R-U—

DE VITO: L-L-O.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh. And can you—could you say anything about your mother? Her disposition, her personality? From the ti—when you were a little girl—

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: —in Italy, how—how was your mother?

DE VITO: She was always a very kindly lady. She was very understanding. She—she was—she was a good mother. [chuckles] That's all I can say.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: She was—she loved me. She was not very demonstrative. But you knew that she loved you.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you have sisters and brothers?

DE VITO: No, I was an only child. She tried to have more children when we came here but she kept losing them all the time.

LEVINE: I see. When you were in Italy as a little girl, was your mother working at all outside of the home?

DE VITO: Oh, yes. Yeah, my family were peasants, farmers. We had—we had land and she was out there working because—

LEVINE: Working the land.

DE VITO: —there were no men around. They were all out—my father was here, my uncles. And the women had to [unclear], you know, hire people to work their land and then they had to cultivate it. So she was out there. S—you see, she was 92 pounds when we came here.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE VITO: Yes. And she, with my aunts, they all worked very hard.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: [clears throat] When she—when—you say your father came first.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember your father in Italy?

DE VITO: No, I was 13 days old when he left.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

DE VITO: He had—he had to leave because my grandparents were in debt because my grandfather had a stroke. And they were in debt and he had to leave. He le—two older brothers were here but they forgot the family, so he had to come here so he could get some money to pay off the debtors. So he left. I was 13 days old when he left.

LEVINE: Wow.

DE VITO: So I never knew my father.

LEVINE: So d—did he correspond with your mother?

DE VITO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Were you aware of—of your father—

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: —in this country—

DE VITO: Oh—

LEVINE: —while you were over there?

DE VITO: Definitely. We had a—we had a huge picture of him over the dresser in the bedroom, and I used to talk to him all the time. [laughs] And I—of course, my mother heard from him regularly.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So then was he sending money to pay off the—the debt all that time?

DE VITO: Yes. Oh, yes. That, he did. He paid off the debt right away, as soon as he got here.

LEVINE: Wow.

DE VITO: Very conscientious man.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: And so then—

LEVINE: Well, tell me about your early life, those seven years.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Were you a religious family?

DE VITO: We were a religious family. I—we are Catholics and, of course, that was ingrained in us. I wouldn't say that we were, you know, fanatics, but we had to go to church on Sundays. And we had saints and, of course, my grandmother always recited the rosary, you know. Things like that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So you had grandparents around.

DE VITO: I had one—one grandmother.

LEVINE: Oh, how do you remember her?

DE VITO: She was a stern woman, loving but stern.

LEVINE: What makes you say stern? What was it—

DE VITO: Be—

LEVINE: What was she stern about?

DE VITO: Well, I was just telling my daughter how—what a spoiled brat I was cuz I was—I lived with her in Italy w—the—the son's families go live with the—with—into the—into the homestead, you know.

LEVINE: The son—in other words, the son marries—

DE VITO: And then—

LEVINE: —and then—

DE VITO: —they live with—with the—the mother and—and—and the father.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: No matter how many—we were three—three families that lived under that roof besides my grandmother.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: Yes. Now, the daughters, when they married, they went to live with their husband's family. So my cousin used to come and visit and I, being spoiled, used to say, "What you are doing here? You've got your own grandmother. You can't come here." And of course, my grandmother used to yell at me. And at—[chuckles] at one point, I must have gotten pretty nasty cuz she took—she had a coal shovel. She hit me on the head with it.

LEVINE: [laughs]

DE VITO: That, I'll never forget. But I deserved it cuz I was very nasty. When I—when I think about how mean I must have been, my poor god—cousin, she was such a nice kid, such a—a lovely girl, you know. But I was jealous. I just—I didn't want her around.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, you didn't want to share your grandmother, I guess, huh?

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE VITO: "You have your own grandmother."

LEVINE: [laughs]

DE VITO: Because her fat—her father's mother was still alive. [laughter]

LEVINE: Well, how about school? Did you attend any—

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: —school over there?

DE VITO: Oh, yes. Yes, I went to school. As a matter of fact, the teacher lived—she—she had a room with my aunt. She lived there. And so she—when I was four years old—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: —I used to go to her room and she would teach me. Yes. Then I—after that, I went to—of course, they had one-room schoolhouses. After that, I went to—I imagine I must have been in the first grade, because seven years old. I—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: —guess I was. But I remember the classroom at the time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: I also remember the teachers, you know, how they used to hit you on the hand. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, let's see. And how about enjoyment? Can you remember anything that you did there—

DE VITO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: —for enjoyment?

DE VITO: Oh, yes. We used to—the children in the—in the neighborhood used—
used to play all the time. We had—oh, we used to go and gather
flowers, put them in bouquets, and then we'd have little—little parties—

LEVINE: Just take this so—

DE VITO: Oh.

LEVINE: —it doesn't get [unclear].

DE VITO: Okay.

LEVINE: Okay.

DE VITO: Have little parties. We'd roam. I remember beautiful fields of flowers. It
was—I was an idyllic childhood, I have to tell you.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: But so what? [chuckles] One particular time, I was busy playing and my
mother said to me, "You have to take this"—somebody's lunch—"to the
field." And I said, "I don't want to go." So she said, "You have to go."
And she put the little—the little thing on my head. I took it and I flung it
down the road. That's one—one thing I remember. [laughter]

LEVINE: Let me take this away from—because it's going—

DE VITO: Oh, I see. It's making noise.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

DE VITO: Sorry.

LEVINE: So—so you really thought the world revolved around you, I guess.
[laughs]

DE VITO: Oh, absolutely. I—

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh-huh. Well, you were a little girl. You were probably
adorable—

DE VITO: And I was [unclear]—

LEVINE: —and everybody loved you.

DE VITO: —and I was an only child.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

DE VITO: My little—my little cousin was too small. My other aunt didn't have any children so I was the queen of the [laughs]—

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

DE VITO: —household.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you think of when you think of I—those—life those first—

DE VITO: Early days?

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE VITO: Oh, yes. Well, I remember going to church on Sundays. We had to climb a hill. After mass, we would go out to eat and I can still smell that meat; it was so delicious. And going to visit my aunts and my uncles. I remember being surrounded by love.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: Always.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: So—

LEVINE: So did your—what—what were—on the land, what was it? Was it animals as well as growing things or what—

DE VITO: We had—we had domestic animals. Not too many though. As I say, the—it was just the women. We had sheep and we had a cow. It was mainly growing—we had olive trees that—olive oil trees. And whatever else we—we grew—wheat, I guess. Wheat and fruit trees. That's about it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So you were too young, I guess, to do any, really, chores.

DE VITO: No.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE VITO: As I said, I—I refused to take the lunch and that's—all [chuckles] I had to do was walk—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE VITO: —walk, you know, a little while—ways and—no, I was spoiled.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you say that y—your father's two older brothers had come here first?

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: And—and so the men of the town were more here or—or of your family, I should say.

DE VITO: My family. Well, yeah, I would say that because, as I say, w—Italy, in those days, was very, very poor. And coming from an agricultural area, we were not poor land-wise, but there was very little money and there were no jobs. So they had to come here so my two—first two uncles, as I said, came because when they—the family needed the money, but once they got here they forgot. They married and they stayed here.

LEVINE: Oh, they married here and stayed.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yes. So then my father came and, thank God, he—he paid off the debt. And then my uncles—one uncle went to South America as—to Argentina, and another uncle came here. An un—another uncle died; he was working on the railroad in Italy and he died. And one aunt came here with her husband.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: And then they had to go back in 1921 because he went—he got sick.

LEVINE: What did you know about America a—as a little girl?

DE VITO: As a child?

LEVINE: Do you remember what you thought or what you expected when you realized you were going to come here?

DE VITO: Um, no. I had no idea what to expect. All I know, I was very excited but I had no idea what I was going to find here.

LEVINE: And how about your mother? How did she feel about coming here, about leaving her—

DE VITO: My mother—as a matter of fact, my father had wanted us to come years before, because he w—he came here in 1920. And he hadn't gone back and he wanted her to come with me. But she would not leave my mother—my grandmother—it was her mother-in-law but she—they—they were so close that she wouldn't leave her, even though my mother-in-law—my grandmother had other daughters. She wouldn't leave her. So my—fi—finally, my father said, "Well." He says, "You either pick my mother or you pick me," because he was getting disgusted.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: So finally—and my grandmother didn't want to come. She did not want to leave Italy. So finally, my mother said, "Well, I've got to go." And that's how we got—came here in 1927.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember [clears throat] anything your mother—your gra—your mother packed to come here?

DE VITO: Ah, I remember—

LEVINE: [coughs]

DE VITO: Well, she brought—she brought a quilt. That I remember. She brought—I remember all the new clothes she had made for us to take with us.

LEVINE: She actually made them or she had them made?

DE VITO: No. We had—we had them made by—

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

DE VITO: —by a seamstress. Other than that quilt, I can't remember anything else—

LEVINE: Did you, as a little girl, bring something that you wanted that was your own?

DE VITO: Not really. I don't remember.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, you say that, you know, it was an agricultural area and Italy was very poor at that time. Did you feel the lack of—of things—

DE VITO: No.

LEVINE: —over there?

DE VITO: No.

LEVINE: No. Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Not at all.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: No.

LEVINE: Okay. And—

DE VITO: We had everything but money. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] Well, that's quite a bit, actually. [laughter] So—so what did you do? You left Guardi—

DE VITO: Guardiagrele.

LEVINE: Guardiagrele.

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And you went to Naples. Do you remember that leg of the trip?

DE VITO: Oh, yes. I remember we stayed—

LEVINE: What do you remember about that?

DE VITO: We stayed in a beautiful hotel. Everything was velvet and rugs on the floor. It was beautiful. And I remember I had—my hair was long when I left Guardiagrele, and when we got to this hotel I met this little girl, who had bobbed hair. Well, I fell in love with her hair. And I pestered my mother until she had me cut her—she—she accepted me—she permitted me to cut my hair. And—

LEVINE: In Naples?

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: [laughs]

DE VITO: In the hotel. The beauty parlor in the hotel cut my hair.

LEVINE: Wow.

DE VITO: My mother felt so bad because I had—as a child, I had golden brown hair, and she felt so bad.

LEVINE: Wow. So you sou—it sounds—if y—could you describe yourself as a little seven-year-old?

DE VITO: I think I was a little brat, actually. I—as I look back on it, I think I was spoiled.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yeah. I made friends easily. I had a lot of friends. But I don't know. I—I really can't say much more than that.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, [clears throat] then—so you were in Naples and you were in this hotel, all of which must have been very new to you.

DE VITO: Oh, abs—absolutely. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE VITO: Coming from a rural—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: —town in Italy. Sure.

LEVINE: So you just felt excited—

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: —about—

DE VITO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: And then I remember going to the—I guess it was the—one of the offices. I don't know if it was the—the consul—the consul or the—the Amer—American Embassy. I don't know where but this—this avenue with gorgeous, beautiful buildings and everything. And as I say, I was taking everything in and enjoying it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: And then you stayed one night in—over in the hotel before the ship, before you boarded—

DE VITO: I don't remember.

LEVINE: —the ship?

DE VITO: I don't remember if I—we must have stayed there more than one night.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: Because as I say, I—I got my—

LEVINE: You got—

DE VITO: —hair cut and, you know. I don't remember what—how long our stay was but it was fun.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And do you remember the name of the ship?

DE VITO: Yes. Conte Biancamano. Yes.

LEVINE: Okay, and—and anything about the voyage?

DE VITO: Oh, yes. That was another lark. [laughs] We were in a cabin with—with four people in a cabin. And we were, how would you say, bunked in with

a mother and a daughter, who were from Naples. And as soon as the poor woman got on—onboard the ship, she passed out. She—she spent her—her whole trip on—in the—in bed. But her daughter and I—my mother was pretty good. She didn't—wasn't too bad. But her daughter and I roamed the ship. We had such a wonderful, wonderful time.
[chuckles]

LEVINE: Do you remember her name, the little girl?

DE VITO: No, I don't. And—

LEVINE: And w—she's about your age?

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: And I felt so bad because they were—they were going to stay in New York. We were going to go into Pennsylvania.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE VITO: And I if—I always say I should have taken her—her—her name.

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

DE VITO: You know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Wow.

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And so anything aboard—during the voyage that happened that—

DE VITO: Well—

LEVINE: —sticks in your mind?

DE VITO: I remember sitting in—at the portholes watching the—the waves against the ship. And I remember, of course, the dining rooms, as huge tables, and I remember first tasting jelly and not liking it. [chuckles] And I remember the ballrooms. Conte Biancamano was a beautiful ship and it was fairly new when we came across. The ballrooms, the grand staircases.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember if you were—if you were traveling first, second, third—

DE VITO: Oh.

LEVINE: —or steerage?

DE VITO: Oh, we weren't steerage; I think it was third class. But it wasn't steerage; it was very nice.

LEVINE: It was very nice—

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: —and you went to a dining room and had dinners and—

DE VITO: Oh, absolutely. Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yes. I can't—I can't say that—I don't know what the first and second class was like because we had it very nice.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Maybe they had separate staterooms in the other classes. I don't know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: But—

LEVINE: Do you remember any, either, examinations or anything that was done before you got here in—in Italy?

DE VITO: In Italy?

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE VITO: I don't remember it. No, I don't.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, do you remember when the ship came into the New York harbor?

DE VITO: Wait a minute. Now, I remember. Maybe it was in Naples that we were checked.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: Yeah, it might have been because I remember white coats and—maybe it was in Naples before we got on the ship.

LEVINE: That would make sense. Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yeah. So—but when we got here, all I remember is getting off the ship. It was at night. It must have been night because everything was dark, getting off the ship. And I don't know if they unloaded us from the side because there was a big wide opening that we went through. And that's another thing now. I don't know whether we came straight—did we come straight to Ellis Island?

LEVINE: No, you would have—you would have had to take a ferry or a tender, a smaller—

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Smaller than the ship you came over on to Ellis Island because—

DE VITO: I see.

LEVINE: —the big ships couldn't land here.

DE VITO: I remember, as I say, getting off the ship at night and this big, wide door, must have been on the side of the ship. And then the next thing I remember is being here. I remember the great staircase, and waiting there and they had this—this food stand that the smell of bread, the A&P bread, it was delicious. The smell was unbelievable. I don't know what they did to the bread. Now, it doesn't smell like that anymore. But my mother buying cold cuts and—and the bread, and then I remember going in a small dinghy or a small boat, very small boat, with the representative of the steamship company that was—that was overseeing us.

LEVINE: Oh, in other words, in was probably an agent?

DE VITO: Agent, yes. Yes. I remember going toward—

LEVINE: Manhattan?

DE VITO: —the Battery, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: So how we got here, I don't remember. If we didn't land on—on Ellis Island, I don't remember how we got here.

LEVINE: Well, do you—can you say anything else about the agent, what role the agent played, as far as you know, in—in y—in your whole—

DE VITO: Well, she would—she—as I say, she appeared here. She took us back to the—to Manhattan. She put us up in a hotel. It was a very sparse but very clean hotel, overnight, and then she took us to Pennsylvania Station. She put us on the train to Johnstown.

LEVINE: Now, is she someone that your mother hired—

DE VITO: No—

LEVINE: —over in Italy or—

DE VITO: Well, I guess—I guess when she had to go to a company, a steamship company or something—

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

DE VITO: —to—to get passage—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: And I guess they're the ones who took care of us.

LEVINE: Ah, I see.

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh.

DE VITO: So—and she met us here and I guess she was a representative of the steamship company, Conte Biancamano. I guess that's how it worked; I don't know. And she met us here and she took care of us—

LEVINE: Huh.

DE VITO: —individually.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE VITO: You know, we were—I don't remember anybody else being with us.

LEVINE: I see. And do you remember when you when you were put up in that little hotel this first few days? Do you remember things about this country that struck you as a seven-year-old?

DE VITO: No. I don't think we stayed—we—if we would, it was probably just overnight—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: —because she came to get us and put us on—and then I remember waiting at Pennsylvania Station.

LEVINE: Oh, what do you remember about that?

DE VITO: Oh, I remember the—all the lights that—all the benches. I remember there was a—of course, [chuckles] always remember food. There was a candy stand that sold candy and other—other stuff. And there were, at the time, Beechnut gum, I think it was. It had—it had the little boy on the thing. This—going back years ago, collecting all those gum wrappers. I had them for years after that.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE VITO: I must have collected about—hundreds of them while my mother was sitting there—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE VITO: —waiting for the—for the train to—to come.

LEVINE: Was chewing gum something you knew about?

DE VITO: No, no. I did not. I just—I just saw those wrappers. They struck me—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: —fancy and I collected those.

LEVINE: [laughs]

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: So—so then, how about the train ride to Johnstown?

DE VITO: Yes, the train ride was [unclear]. It always seems to be at night for some reason. The train ride was very interesting. I remember sitting there and

there were these two young ladies opposite us who had these—those clo—clo—[unclear] hats that they—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: —wore in those days. Beautifully dressed, and lipstick so red. [laughs] I guess I wasn't used to that, that it stuck in my mind.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: Yeah. So we slept and then we landed—and we landed—we arrived in Johnstown, eight o'clock in the morning. And my father was waiting for us and—

LEVINE: And what was that like?

DE VITO: —I recognized him right away.

LEVINE: Really?

DE VITO: As soon as I saw him, I said to my mother, "Oh, there's—there's Papa."

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: And sure enough, he was so amazed that I—that I knew him, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: But of course, we—I had that picture in front of me all the time. Yes, and so he took us to—to where he lived. And—

LEVINE: How about your mother during the voyage and the—and the train ride and everything?

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: What would you say—

DE VITO: How she—

LEVINE: —was going on with her? How was she taking it? How was she—

DE VITO: Sh—she was—I don't know. She was just there—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: —you know, doing what she had to do and—

LEVINE: Do.

DE VITO: —and—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: —being very kindly. She was always—she never—never raised her voice with me. And that was it. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yeah. She just took care of me and we got here whole. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So how about Johnstown? What had—what did you come to? What—where was your father living and—

DE VITO: Johnstown. Yes. We—we came to—he was living with this family that he had boarded with. And it was a double house so she turned over the—one of the houses to him. And he bought all their furniture that was there. I think it had belonged to her mother. And her par—parents had died and so we lived there. It was—I—it was not a—I guess it was not a bad area. It was not a rich area. It was not a bad area. And I remember going to the neighbor next door. They were—I don't know what they were but the—they were probably Anglo-Saxon. I don't remember. But I remember a little girl was sitting at the table. They had their breakfast table all set up and they were eating, and she just kept looking at me and I kept looking at her. [laughter] I tried to cont—to talk to the children on the street. But of course, I didn't make sense but—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: —that was my first—my first impression that—that day. It was very exciting.

LEVINE: Do you—did—did the woman who your father had been a boarder with—did she continue to have boarders that you were aware of?

DE VITO: No. No, she didn't. She had—at the time there, she had two or three children.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: And I think—no, I think—he was the only one that lived with them because her husband was a friend of his.

LEVINE: I see. I see.

DE VITO: So that's why he went to live with them and because they knew that his family was coming, they offered him the apartment and—actually, it wasn't an apartment. It was a little—

LEVINE: House.

DE VITO: —upstairs, downstairs. It was a—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: —one of the double houses. So—

LEVINE: So your father had been a farmer in—in Italy.

DE VITO: In Italy, he was a farmer.

LEVINE: And what did he do when he got—

DE VITO: He was a miner when he came here.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: He worked in the—in the mines in Johnstown. And—

LEVINE: Well, is that coalmines?

DE VITO: Yes, coalmines.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about coalmining? Anything about your father and—and the whole c—coalmining—

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: —career?

DE VITO: It was a—it was a hard—a hard job. I remember him coming home at night, very tired. And then we—we left Johnstown proper. We went to live in the suburbs but he was still at the mine. And my mother kept asking him to leave because it was a dangerous job. So what happened

was the mine had a cave-in. This was in 1930—yeah, '30—'30—the—the end of 1930, 1931. It had a cave-in and his partner—they worked together—his partner was crushed under the stone. And he was lucky that—he went one way and his partner went the other way and he came out alive. And so my mother said, “I absolutely do not want you going in there again.” So he quit and I had an uncle who lived in Pittsburgh, who was a contractor. And he said, “Come here. You’ll work with me.” And so we left Johnstown in 1931 and we went to Pittsburgh and my father worked with my uncle. So we lived in Johnst—in Pittsburgh for a year. At that time, I had another—my father’s youngest brother, who had abandoned his wife in Italy—he didn’t want to go back anymore. And he had a child with her. And—and he had taken to drinking so—and of course, then the Depression was—was very, very deep.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: So—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

DE VITO: In the meantime, the aunt that had come to America in 1921—had come back to Italy in 1921, came—had come back to the States. And she had settled in New York because that’s where her husband was. He was also in debt. So she had to come back to pay off his debts.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE VITO: [chuckles] So she said to my father—she said, “Please bring Moro.” [PH] That was my uncle’s name. “Please bring Moro to me here. I’ll take care of him. Get him out of that element.” So my father (he wasn’t working at the time) took my uncle and he brought him to New York. So when my aunt got her two brothers here, she said to my father, “Why don’t you bring your family here? In New York, there’s always something to do. Bring them here and you’ll make a living.” So that’s what we did; we packed up and came to New York.

LEVINE: So your father had been doing the construction work with his other brother?

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: But the—that didn’t suit him that much? Is that what [unclear]—

DE VITO: Well, he—he—at the time, I don't think my uncle had too much work.

LEVINE: Oh, I—

DE VITO: You know.

LEVINE: Oh, that's true.

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: It was the Depression [unclear].

DE VITO: Yes, it was.

LEVINE: Okay. Uh-huh.

DE VITO: And—but he came m—mainly because of my uncle.

LEVINE: I see.

DE VITO: To get—to get him—he had—as I say, he had become—drinking a little bit too much and, as I say, he—he had abandoned his family in Italy. So we came—we came here and my aunt had an apartment for us here.

LEVINE: Where was that?

DE VITO: That was in the Bronx.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: And I remember my father and mother only had \$700 at that time. So he put this money in a—what do they call that? It's not a bank, actually. It's—I forget what they call it. Anyway, this man was taking care of it. What the hell do they call that thing? I can't remember.

LEVINE: I'm not sure either.

DE VITO: Anyway, he had the money and he—he banked it for us. And my father had to go to work for a dollar a day in a laundry heating—bringing up cinders from steps, up and down the steps. He did that for a while. My mother took in homework, embroidering, and that's how we struggled.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: So what happened was that, because the Depression was so bad, this poor man that had—that had this—I forget—what? Loan and savings? What do they call those things?

LEVINE: Was it like a club?

DE VITO: No, it wasn't—

LEVINE: That—

DE VITO: It wasn't a club. It was—ah [sighs]—I can't think of the—anyway, other people had money with him and a lot of the people were starving. They needed money and they would go to him. And he was a good-hearted man so he would lend.

LEVINE: Ah.

DE VITO: So what happened was that, after a while, he couldn't meet the expense so he committed suicide. So with that, you know, the—the creditors came in and I think my mother and father got \$300.

LEVINE: Out of their 700?

DE VITO: Out of this, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: So it was a—a very bad struggle, very bad. So—

LEVINE: Well, how long did that go on for your family before they were able to—

DE VITO: Oh. So then—I forget what year it was—someone told my father, "If you go to—to the relief people, they'll probably—you know, they'll give you a job." So he said, "All right." So he went to the relief and he said to the agent—the first time he came, he says, "I'm not destitute. I don't want to stay on relief. I want you to try to get me a job." So he had to give him money, naturally, because otherwise, nobody does anything for nothing. So he paid him and he got him a job in Fordham Hospital, which was—it was nearby us, and he worked there until he died, until he—you know, he—he had to leave because then he had got bleeding ulcers and he couldn't work anymore. But he was getting a dollar a day pension and my mother was making do with that. It was rough. It was really rough.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE VITO: And then after that, of course, I—I was going to school, finished high school.

LEVINE: W—now, where did you start school in this country?

DE VITO: Oh, I started school in Johnstown. Yes.

LEVINE: And do you remember a difference between the school you had attended in Italy and the school?

DE VITO: Oh, yes. Of course. The school was—

LEVINE: What was the big difference?

DE VITO: Oh, well, this school was big. In Johnstown, it was a big school, compared to the one room that I had there. And I—they put me in first grade and I remember the n—the song, “Bobby Shafto.” I’ll never forget that that was the first song I—I learned here.

LEVINE: Do you remember it?

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Can you sing it?

DE VITO: “Bobby Shafto went to sea.”

LEVINE: Whatever you can remember—

DE VITO: [chuckles]

LEVINE: —it would be nice to have it on the tape.

DE VITO: “Bobby Shafto went to sea.” Oh, God, I—I’m forgetting everything. No, I can’t remember it.

LEVINE: But this, you learned in first grade here.

DE VITO: Yes, first grade here.

LEVINE: Wow.

DE VITO: [unclear]—

LEVINE: And what about English? How was that for you to learn it?

DE VITO: It must have been—it must have come pretty easily because I was in first grade for two months, and they transferred me to the second grade. And I was in the second grade and then, of course, we went to—we moved to Pittsburgh after that. So I was in the third, fourth, and I was entering the fifth grade when we moved to New York.

LEVINE: So by the time you hit New York you were probably very fluent.

DE VITO: Oh, oh.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE VITO: Absolutely, yes. No, I—that—that—that happened very quickly. It must have, because I—I don't remember any difficulty.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember if you were—[clears throat] ever experienced the kids calling you a greenhorn or the—something about being an immigrant that gave you some kind of stigma? Did you ever experience any of that?

DE VITO: No, I never experienced that because we were with—with other immigrants. You know, Johnstown.

LEVINE: Did—did people know each other from the Old Country or not?

DE VITO: No. Well, no. In Johnstown, all we knew were these people. And, well, my father had cousins in Holsopple [PH]. It was near Johnstown. He had cousins there and he visited them quite a bit. But as I say, there were Polish and there were Russians. There were—all immigrants.

LEVINE: Oh, so in your—

DE VITO: They were all—

LEVINE: —school there were—

DE VITO: Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: We were all in—once in a while, you'd find WASPy kids.

LEVINE: Oh, [chuckles]

DE VITO: You know? That—

LEVINE: They were the exceptions.

DE VITO: Yeah, and—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE VITO: But—but we really didn't notice them that much because, I—I don't know. I think they played with us. The teachers were very kindly.

LEVINE: Were they?

DE VITO: Ver—very nice. One teacher, when I was in the second grade, she said to me one day—she was Polish. She said to me, "Your name's not Jessie." She says, "What is your name?" So I said, "It's Cesira." So she says, "Well, I'm going to call you Cesira from now on because that's a pretty name." Because she was Polish and she had the same background. The other teachers were all pretty WASP-ish. You know, they were—

LEVINE: Well, now, the Jessica, did that come out of Cesira or—

DE VITO: Yes. Well, what happened was, as I say, this lady that we moved in with took me to school to register me. And I guess Cesira sounded like Jessie to the teacher, because next thing I know, I'm Jessie. [chuckles] You know, the transition was—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: That's where it came from, when I was registered in school.

LEVINE: But you're saying—the—just let me make sure I understand.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Cesira is G—is C-E-S—

DE VITO: I-R-A.

LEVINE: —I-R-A.

DE VITO: It's the female of Caesar. Cesira.

LEVINE: Oh. But it sounds like a T in there but it isn't.

DE VITO: No, no. It's R-A.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Cesita, I imagine, would be Spanish but—

LEVINE: I see.

DE VITO: But mine is R-A. Cesira.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So let's see. So did your personality change? In other words, you were [chuckles] like this little girl [unclear]—

DE VITO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: [chuckles] And what happened to you?

DE VITO: Well, chil—children will do that to you. [laughter] Yes. Well, as I say, I must—I—I had no problems. I always had a lot of friends so I must—I must have been careful.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: You know, that I—I was not a very pushy person.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: But I remember one—one incident in school when I was in Johnstown. We were in Oakhurst. That was the name of the—the little town—the little town. I guess it was a suburb of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. She accused me of taking her—her bankbook.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE VITO: And that was one time I stood up and I told the teacher, "I did not take it. She's lying!" And so I—I remember that—that time that I spoke up, you know, because I was—I wasn't guilty.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: And she had accused me. So, no, I stood my ground when I had to but, usually, I was pretty willing to go along with everybody else.

LEVINE: I see.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: I see. And did you feel there was a time when you felt like you were an American? Did—did your—

DE VITO: I always felt like that.

LEVINE: —idea of yourself change in any ways, or you—when you came here, you—you just accepted that this was—

DE VITO: Yes, I just—I went right into it. One thing I resented was my cousins always—any time they introduced me to anybody, said, “She was born in Italy.” That, I resented. I—I didn’t want to be—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE VITO: —made a—different from the others. I wanted to—to be part of the—

LEVINE: The group.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father want you and—and for themselves, too, to be American?

DE VITO: Oh, absolutely.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: Absolutely.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: It was—there was no question about that. As a matter of fact, no, there was never any question about that. What happened to my father was that he had—he had c—he came here in 1910. And of course, having a family in Italy, he had intentions of going back. So he had to serve a year in the army in Italy. So what happened to him was that when he went to visit his family to serve that one year, war broke out in 1917 and he was caught in the Italian Army. So—and that’s where he—you know, he married my mother and I was born and was there till 1920, and then he came back here.

LEVINE: I see.

DE VITO: Yes, but—

LEVINE: So he—he was in the—in World War I for a year.

DE VITO: In the Italian Army, yes. Seven years, he served.

LEVINE: Seven.

DE VITO: Seven years, yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did he ever talk about that?

DE VITO: Yes, he would tell war stories and, especially, they—fighting on the Austrian front. And they had a—a very huge—oh, where they had to escape. What would you call that? A retreat.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

DE VITO: And he used to tell us that graphically.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: You know, how—about how—how bad it was.

LEVINE: Did he have any repercussions, personally, from—

DE VITO: From—

LEVINE: —having served in—in World War I?

DE VITO: No, I don't think so. No.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: But I know that when he worked in the mine, he's—his foot got caught in—under a stone and it—his foot went one way and his leg went the other.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE VITO: And they had to twist it back. And he had one of the—his bone was sticking out a lot, you know. It w—I'm telling you, it was—they really went through a lot, those poor people.

LEVINE: Well, I guess the struggle here was, in some ways, worse because of the Depression than—

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: —than the struggle in—in Italy.

DE VITO: In Italy? I don't know. I guess—I guess so. But—

LEVINE: But did your mother and father ever want to go back?

DE VITO: No. Once my mother came here, it was—

LEVINE: Mmm.

DE VITO: She didn't even want to write to anybody in Italy anymore. She's [laughs]—I don't want—I don't want—you find a lot of people like that.

LEVINE: Really?

DE VITO: Once they leave—

LEVINE: They—

DE VITO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: It—it was just—

DE VITO: Because the misery is so bad, you know. But with her, she—she really—she had—she had me. She had my father. She didn't want anybody else. She never wanted to go back.

LEVINE: But when you say the misery was so bad and people didn't want to write, because the misery was bad here during the Depression or that—

DE VITO: No, no, no. Well, this—we came be—w—just a little bit before the Depression.

LEVINE: Before, right.

DE VITO: Yes. It got bad later on. But, no. She—she just felt that she had struggled very hard there. And now she was here, she wanted to forget about it.

LEVINE: I see.

DE VITO: You see.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. It was like to start fresh.

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: She—she taught herself to read and write.

LEVINE: Hmm, good for her.

DE VITO: My—my mother was a—was an orphan, she and her five—her siblings were left orphans. She must have been about 12 years old and they had to fend for themselves with the help of—of the relatives around them. So she never went to school. But while she was—she taught herself to read and write when my father was in the army so she could communicate with him.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE VITO: So it wa—didn't come easy to her, so when she got here, she says, "Now"—she says, "No more letters."

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: [chuckles]

LEVINE: Did your mother or father ever tell you how they met?

DE VITO: Oh, yes. That's—that's another story. When my mother was—she had—her mother was laid up in bed. And she had—they had large apple orchards, so they had a lot of apples. So my father, who was thr—was three years younger than my mother, he knew that she had apples. So he went up to the house one day. He was three, I guess, and she was six.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE VITO: Yeah, that's how close they were.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE VITO: You know, they lived across the street, practically, from each other. And he says—he says, “I—I want some apples.” So she didn’t want her mother to hear so she says, “I’ll bring ‘em out to you.” She whispered, “I’ll bring them out to you.” So he got very loud and he says, “Give me some apples, you son of a bitch!” You know, kids.

LEVINE: Three-year-olds.

DE VITO: So when she heard that, she opened the door, went out and got a rock, and she threw it at him. She hit him on the forehead right here and he fell. So of course, his brother, everybody ran to pick him up. And she put a gash and he had—he had the scar till he—till he died. [chuckles] That’s how they met. [laughter]

LEVINE: I assume they—

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: —met again later as—

DE VITO: Later on—

LEVINE: [laughs]

DE VITO: Later on, they met, yes. So when—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE VITO: As I say, when he went back to Italy to serve—so my—my mother—my grandmother always liked her. And so she said to my father, you know, “She’s available.” So that’s how they got married.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: They married during the war; they eloped—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: —during the war.

LEVINE: Wow.

DE VITO: And—yeah.

LEVINE: Well, now, how about you? You continued through school. Through high school, did you go?

DE VITO: Through high school, yes. Yes.

LEVINE: And you were then in the Bronx?

DE VITO: Right.

LEVINE: And what did you do after high school?

DE VITO: After high school, I didn't want to go to college. I didn't want to be any professional. I loved steno so I became a—so we had this steno teacher, told us, "If you people want to make a living, you go and take a civil service job." Then, civil service were the best. Of course, this—this was still very bad Depression. So that's what I did. And I took several civil service tests and I was hired, and I worked for the National—Labor Relations Board for six months. And then I was called—during the war, I was called to Governor's Island, where I was there till the war ended and got on Governor's Island. Yes.

LEVINE: What—what were you doing? Were you be—doing secretarial work?

DE VITO: Secretarial work.

LEVINE: And the Coast Guards were there? Is that who was there?

DE VITO: No, no. The Army was there.

LEVINE: Oh, the Army was there.

DE VITO: Yes, during—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: —the war, the Army was there. That was—that was a wonderful period in my life too. I loved that work [unclear].

LEVINE: Well, could you say anything about the buildup to the war and during the war, how people were—

DE VITO: Oh—

LEVINE: —about the war or anything? How the war affected your family?

DE VITO: Well, I know a lot of my—my cousins went into the war. They had—they were called and that was as far as I—I felt, you know, the rest—my

family, of course, was just me. And there were [sighs]—I worked at the World's Fair in 1941—

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: 1940, as a matter of fact. And I remember, you know, st—the storm coming. I remember be—I—I worked in the Italian pavilion. The Polish pavilion was across the street from us. That was a very sad time for them because the Nazis had gotten into Poland.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: Yes. And then, of course, they closed the—that building, they closed too. I don't know if—I don't know if Germany was represented or Russia. I know they closed several of the foreign buildings. And—

LEVINE: Could you say anything else about the World Fair, what—what it was like or—

DE VITO: Oh, it was so exciting.

LEVINE: Was it?

DE VITO: It was so exciting.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE VITO: Oh, is—I—I don't know what—they had the Gardens on Parade. That was near our building. And they had a beautiful garden all set up, you know. Do—d—did you go to the Botanical Gardens here in New York? The Bronx Botanical Gardens?

LEVINE: I've been to the Brooklyn but not the Bronx.

DE VITO: The Brooklyn? Well, they have—they have gardens set up, you know.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: And that was a beautiful spot. I spent a lot of time there. And of course, the Appricade [PH] and the music. It was always festive. I remember Frank Sinatra was just coming up. His music was blaring across the night sky. It was—it was very exciting.

LEVINE: It must have been for a young woman to be—

DE VITO: Oh, God!

LEVINE: —working in the World Fair.

DE VITO: I was 20, 21—20—20. Twenty. It was. It was very exciting and met lot of people, come by. Ethel Merman, I remember. I remember FDR's mother coming by.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE VITO: It was interesting, very interesting.

LEVINE: So how did you meet your husband?

DE VITO: Well, my husband was—he had an aunt living—an aunt and uncle living next door to us. And she came over to me and she says, “My nephew would like to meet you. What—would you like to go out with him?” At that time, I was working for the U.S. Attorney's Office. After Governor's Island, I went to the U.S. Attorney's Office. And I said, “I don't go on blind dates.” “Well,” she said. “He's a very nice boy.” So my mother said, “What have you got to lose?” She says, “You know, make her happy.” So we arranged to meet down there and he said, “I'll have a red car and I'll—right in front of the courthouse for you.” And so I said to my girlfriend, “You stay with me because if I don't like what he looks like, we'll just make believe that we didn't see him.” [laughter] But of course, when I looked on, there was a nice, tall, handsome fellow with a nice car. So I said, “Let's go down and meet him.” [laughs] So we did and he took us out to supper, and then we walked up to—we dropped her off at the subway station and we drove up to the Cloisters. Do you know where the Cloisters are?

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah.

DE VITO: And we spent a nice evening there. And he seemed like a very nice fellow, so—and he took me home and so he always makes fun of me because I said to him—the first night, mind you—I said to him, “Well.” I said, “I like you,” and I said, “I don't know if you like me but if you have intentions of just fooling around,” I says, “take the road.” [laughter] Yes, I put it right on the table for him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Because I was—at that time, I was—I was, what, 27 or 28. So he called again and—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: —here we are, six children later. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] What is your husband's name?

DE VITO: Vincent.

LEVINE: Vincent.

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And your children's names?

DE VITO: Well, the oldest one, you met, Matthew.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Then I have a—a daughter, Josephine, after him. And Margaret, you met.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: And then there's Vincent and Maryellen and Donna. Yes.

LEVINE: Wow. So what would you say, looking back on your life, has brought you a lot of satisfaction?

DE VITO: Well, I—I—my satisfaction is that I did everything I wanted to do. The decisions I made, I didn't make hastily, and once I made them it was gone. It—so I—I can't say that life has been bad to me—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: —because I'm sure that I've had to make—ah, what do you call it? I've had to make—

LEVINE: Compromises?

DE VITO: —compromises—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: —along the way. But I knew where I was going and I—I followed it and where—wherever it—the road wandered, that's where it went. That's it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. No regrets.

DE VITO: No regrets.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: None whatsoever.

LEVINE: That's wonderful.

DE VITO: The only regret I have is that I never learned to drive a car.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE VITO: And my husband discouraged me. I had children, of course. And he said, "No." He says, "I don't trust you behind the wheel with the children." And of course, we lived—we had the bus right up the corner.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: We had—you know, he drove so I—I didn't feel that it was necessary.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: But that's my one regret now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Because I'm stuck in the house.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Have to depend on the children. He can't drive.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: So—

LEVINE: Well, do you have grandchildren?

DE VITO: Oh, yes. I have 10 grandchildren.

LEVINE: [chuckles] I see. Wow. Uh-huh.

DE VITO: Uh-huh, yes.

LEVINE: So is there—do you feel like Italian American or how—how do you think about Italianess and American side—

DE VITO: No, I—

LEVINE: —or whatever?

DE VITO: That always bothers me when they—when they try to—

LEVINE: Hyphenate American—

DE VITO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And something else. Uh-huh.

DE VITO: No, I—we shouldn't be like this. People are here. We're Americans. Okay. We—we all have our backgrounds and, of course, you can't help that. You follow your background. But to say, for the—for the differences to divide us, that's very—that's heartbreaking because when—when we were going to school, it was America. America, America. And we were taught that patriotic feeling for this country that it—I really—when I see people desecrating the flag, it bothers me because, to me, this is our country. And I don't want—and I don't want to be differentiated, you know, put aside because I'm Italian.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: You know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE VITO: To have that background. I want to be one.

LEVINE: Right.

DE VITO: You see?

LEVINE: Right, uh-huh.

DE VITO: So I don't—I don't know what's happening to these people here. I don't know. Being American is second—is second rate, is second-class. They're—they're everything else but Americans.

LEVINE: Huh.

DE VITO: And—

LEVINE: That's interesting. Yeah.

DE VITO: —that bother's me.

LEVINE: Yeah. What about the World—we're near—nearly at the end of the tape. But what about the World Trade Towers? Could you say anything about your reaction or—

DE VITO: Reaction.

LEVINE: —response—

DE VITO: Oh, my God!

LEVINE: —when that happened?

DE VITO: I was—I came downstairs and my daughter and my husband were watching. And my daughter said to me—sh—she says, “They bombed the Trade Center, the World Trade Center.” I said, “What?” So we sat there and, you know, so dumbfounded. You don't realize—I didn't realize what was going on. It was just too horrifying, I guess, to—to take in. Even my other daughter, she was on her way to work—she was on the subway.

LEVINE: Oh, boy.

DE VITO: And she had—they had just come up. She worked in Brooklyn at the time. And she saw all the smoke in the sky. She said, “I—I didn't know what to make of it. It was just so”—God! I never came down to see it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. It's just as well, in my opinion.

DE VITO: Oh, my God!

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

DE VITO: Ah—

LEVINE: Well, is there anything else about the immigration experience? Do you think that it had an impact on you, that—you know, that you came here from another culture at seven years old—

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: —and then you lived out your life. Do you think that immigration experience somehow made a difference in your personality or the way you approached things or your attitudes? Anything like that?

DE VITO: I don't think so because I was too young—

LEVINE: You were too young to—

DE VITO: —at the time to—to—have—having totally becoming involved in—in that culture. See, my—my—my experiences started here.

LEVINE: Here, right.

DE VITO: Yes.

LEVINE: Were there any attitudes or—or customs or ways of your mother or father that they tried to pass on to you that maybe you passed on to your own children, or maybe you didn't—

DE VITO: Well—

LEVINE: —but—

DE VITO: All I can say is they were hardworking, honest, charitable, religious. [unclear]. When you say religious, I don't mean in—in the sense that they were—God-fearing, I would say, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

DE VITO: Because we—none of my family is—I say that very strict Catholics. We are Catholics. We attend church. But we're not fanatical, I would say.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: You know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE VITO: No, they passed on very good qualities and I try to pass on to my children. And, hopefully, they'll pass it on to their children. Love of country, love of home, love of people. And that's about it.

LEVINE: Wow. I think that's a beautiful place to end. I want to thank you so much.

DE VITO: Oh, it was my pleasure.

LEVINE: Lovely interview.

DE VITO: You and—

LEVINE: It was lovely to—to see you and—

DE VITO: And making me talk. [laughter]

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I've been speaking with Jessica De Vito here today on September 26th, the year 2003. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]